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**HISTORY OF MEDICINE
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Dr. William Fisher Norris.

A Memoir.

By SAMUEL D. RISLEY, A.M., M.D.,
PHILADELPHIA, PENN.

[Reprinted from American Ophthalmological Society Transactions, 1903.]

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It has seemed to this society highly fitting that it should pause in its scientific proceedings to honor the memory of one of its distinguished members, and to enrich its annals with a suitable memoir. It is doubtless wise that for a brief hour we should relax our strenuous grasp upon the daily affairs which engross us and, turning our minds from the struggle for the emoluments of life, gravely contemplate, from its thoughtful beginning to its serene closing, the career of a man singularly endowed by nature and happy circumstance to enter the arena of human endeavor.

Dr. William Fisher Norris was born in Philadelphia January 6, 1839, and died November 18, 1901. He had for many years been subject to periodical attacks of rheumatism and rheumatic gout, and for a year or more prior to his death had suffered from glycosuria, which, however, was held under control by a prudent regimen, so that he continued his public and private work with such faithfulness that he did not appear to his friends and colleagues to be seriously out of health. In the early autumn of 1901 he returned from his usual vacation passed at his beautiful summer home, Woodbourne, in the mountains of Pennsylvania overlooking the picturesque and historic valley of the Wyoming, and entered upon his accustomed work.

He soon suffered an attack of pneumonia to which, after a lingering illness, he finally succumbed. His death came as a grave shock to a large group of surviving friends and professional colleagues, to whom many years of association had endeared him. Not only, however, to those who were honored by his personal friendship was his death a sore bereavement, but was felt as a

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his mother, Mary P. Fisher, were both the descendents of cultured families who had been prominent in the business and social life of the community for several generations. He was personally endowed with a fine presence, vigorous health, and ample means.

His early education was obtained in the Ferris School, at that time held in much repute in Philadelphia for the thoroughness and efficiency of its preliminary training. He then entered the College Department of the University of Pennsylvania, from which he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts with the class of 1857 and matriculated in the Medical Department, graduating M.D. in 1861. In the same year he was elected resident physician in the Pennsylvania Hospital, and served the required term of eighteen months. Some phases of his character are well illustrated by a stirring episode occurring during his residency which he related to me many years later. Hearing an unusual commotion in one of the wards, he entered and found the nurses and many of the patients fleeing in dismay before a stalwart and violent lunatic, who had entered the opposite end of the ward with a huge cleaver in his upraised hand. No sooner had he seen the young doctor, dressed in his ward coat, than he ran violently with weapon raised to brain him. Dr. Norris awaited calmly his rapid approach and, as the blow descended, with quick eye, firm and accurate hand, grasped the wrist with the unyielding, paralyzing grasp of the trained athlete, and at the same time tripped the feet of the man, pinioned his arms, and so held him until help arrived and he was placed in a strait-jacket.

In this occurrence we see portrayed many phases of Dr. Norris' character: courage, no hesitation, no subterfuge, but a straightforward, thoughtful, efficient, and wise course of action under extraordinary stress of circumstances unforeseen. During

many years of almost daily association I many times witnessed demonstrations of this same mental grasp of trying situations.

The time spent in the calm and cloistered shades of this ancient and renowned hospital, then as now under the management of the Society of Friends, was for the most part, however, in vivid contrast to the stirring and anxious life of the nation. It was the early period of the Civil War. At the close of his residency in the hospital he sought and obtained a commission from the government as assistant surgeon in the U. S. army, and was placed in charge of the Douglas Hospital at Washington, where he served at this arduous post of duty until his resignation in 1865, when he retired with the brevet rank of captain, "conferred for meritorious service during the war." In this connection mention should be made of the splendid and heroic work which Dr. Norris performed in taking care of the wounded at Gettysburg, whither he was sent the day after the battle. "I have heard his conduct at this time most highly lauded by officers who were present, and have heard Dr. Norris himself relate how, in the church temporarily made to serve as a hospital, he had operated and dressed wounds continuously for thirty-six hours, without food or rest, being finally forced to desist from sheer exhaustion. The many letters of gratitude which he received in later years from patients whose lives he had saved full well bespoke the skill and care with which he had ministered to their needs."* During these anxious and busy times at this famous military hospital he found time to furnish numerous contributions to the Army Medical Museum, and in conjunction with Dr. William Thomson spent much time in the development of photography as a graphic means of recording the appearance of injuries and diseases, and in experiments in micro-photography. This splendid work of Drs. Thomson and Norris led, not only directly to the establishment of the "Photography Bureau" in the army, but they were the first to successfully reproduce by the wet collodion process, objects seen in the field of the microscope, with both low and high powers. This work reflected great credit upon the medical staff of the army and led to the splendid devel-

*G. W. Morris, M.D.

opments later in the hands of Dr. Woodward, aided by the ample resources of the Surgeon-General's office (Thomson). It is probable that the optical studies involved in these researches were the beginning of his interest in physiological optics, forming, as it does, such an important chapter in ophthalmology, to which his subsequent life was devoted with such conspicuous success. Thus early in his professional life as a military surgeon we see evidence of that fondness for industrious research and painstaking study which so signally characterized his subsequent career.

In the autumn of 1865, then 26 years of age, he sailed for Europe for the purpose of pursuing his studies abroad, following in this the example of many illustrious predecessors who, for more than a hundred years, had rendered famous the courts of his alma mater.

When in reminiscent mood he often related to me many interesting and often amusing incidents falling under his observation while visiting the various ophthalmological clinics in Europe. His characterization and personal estimate of the men who conducted them, and his description of their peculiar methods of work, proved of great interest to me when in later years I was thrown in contact in Europe with these men of whom my first impressions had been received from Dr. Norris. The greater part of his time abroad was spent in Vienna under the instruction of Arlt, Jaeger, and Mauthner, for each of whom he retained throughout life the profoundest respect, and never lost his sense of gratitude to these eminent masters. To Arlt, especially, he often referred, not only as an authority in ophthalmology, but with affectionate regard, always speaking of him in tones which one employs only for the friend he loves.

He also spent much time in the Pathological Institute where, in conjunction with Stricker, he did valuable work in experimental study of the pathologic histology of the cornea, the results of which were published under their joint authorship in an extended brochure ("Study of the Inflammations of the Cornea") "*Versuche Ueber Hornhautenzundung.*" The great value

of these early studies of the pathological histology of the cornea in Stricker's laboratory were constantly manifested in the daily routine of his clinical work by an obvious familiarity with the diseases of that important membrane, and furnish a striking illustration of the essential value of such work as preparation for the study, diagnosis, and treatment of disease.

I dwell upon this phase of his preparation for the reason that it had, in the first place, a controlling influence over his methods of work as furnishing an example for research in all other directions, and further, because it illustrates forcibly his mental trend. He was never satisfied with a more or less shrewd guessing at the nature of disease, or with the empirical therapeutic measures based upon a possibly false hypothetical premise. As a result of this mental habit his time was largely passed in the endeavor to verify by careful observation and laboratory study the theories promulgated by others.

The persistent, unflagging patience with which he kept in mind many unsolved problems in ophthalmology and patiently waited for the opportunity to study cases and to secure pathological material for examination, must ever remain, in the minds of those who were familiar with his work and its methods, as one of the striking characteristics of the man.

His mental habit was not, therefore, that of a Kepler, to construct hypotheses and then to spend his nights in hunting them down, but rather that of a Galileo, who observed the conditions presented and then constructed his conclusions from observed facts.

After visiting the principal clinics of the continent and in England he returned, in 1870, to Philadelphia, and soon after was appointed lecturer in ophthalmology and otology at the University of Pennsylvania, then located at 9th and Chestnut Sts., when together with Dr. George Strawbridge, who had a like appointment, he established the first of the special clinics in that institution. He had, however, resolved to devote himself to ophthalmology alone, and therefore appointed Dr. Bertolet to take charge of the diseases of the ear. Three years later, when the university was removed

to West Philadelphia and the University Hospital erected, Dr. Norris was made Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology and Dr. Strawbridge was awarded the professorship of Otology. Later, Dr. Norris was made honorary professor, and in 1876, full Professor of Ophthalmology, which chair he filled with dignity and honor to the close of his life. In 1870 he was elected a member of the American Ophthalmology Society, and in 1871 presented his first paper, entitled "Paralysis of the Trigemini, followed by sloughing of the Cornea," a study, it will be observed, in line with his researches in Stricker's laboratory.

In April, 1872, a few months after the establishment of the special lectureship and clinic at 9th and Chestnut Sts., I received, by the hands of the late Dr. Charles Hunter, a message from Dr. Norris, whom I had never seen, requesting me to take the position of chief of clinic. The opportunity thus offered was eagerly accepted, and proved to be the beginning of an unbroken association as teacher and pupil, friend and colleague, destined to continue until the close of his eminently industrious, painstaking, and useful life. I cannot forget our first meeting, in his father's library at 16th and Locust Sts. I was much impressed by his unusual and striking personality. He was 33 years of age, possessed of a massive frame, well rounded, not corpulent, a large dome-like head, with the blonde hair of a Norseman, trimmed in the conventional form, a full beard, not long, light in color, fine in texture, a complexion ruddy with the tints of perfect, vigorous health, and a calm benignant manner, striking in one of his age, which found expression largely through his clear, blue, unhesitating eyes.

The years devoted exclusively to preparation were at an end, and he was carefully and thoughtfully beginning his special life work in the city of his birth. Any complete delineation of his career and its influence during the twenty-nine years, which comprise the interval between this beginning and its close, would form an important chapter in the history of American Ophthalmology as represented in Philadelphia. It was the beginning of a new era in the medical department of the University, indeed, it

may truthfully be said, in American medicine. At the time he made his choice, specialism in medicine was not regarded with favor in the United States, either by the eminent men who filled the chairs in our medical schools, by the body of the profession, or by the more conservative members of the community. The general feeling, therefore, certainly in Philadelphia, was one of hostility. The members of the Medical Faculty at the University, although they were teaching their own special branches of medicine and surgery, nevertheless, in the daily routine of medical and surgical practice covered with few exceptions the entire professional field. They, for the most part, both in training and mental habit, belonged to the preceding generation, had inherited a most vigorous and wholesome antipathy to charlatanism, and were prone to regard with distrust any innovation tending to disrupt the established conventions of professional life and practice. But few men could at that time have entered this new field in Philadelphia medicine so opportunely: the son of a great surgeon whose career had been pursued in the best associations of lay and professional life; an alumnus of the University, which from its earliest history had been the training school for the best youths of the city; well endowed intellectually, possessing ample means, and fully equipped for his chosen work in the schools of Europe; none, not even the most conservative, could gainsay his right to such a choice, assail his position, or criticise his preparation for special work. The profession in Philadelphia is therefore indebted to Dr. Norris, not only for his scientific achievements, but also for boldly assisting in opening the way for specialism in medicine to others less fortunately situated to follow. In this he was very fortunate in having for colleagues a coterie of eminent men, Dr. Dyer, too soon lost to science, Dr. Strawbridge, Dr. William Thomson, Dr. George C. Harlan, Dr. Douglass Hall, all members of this society, who, working together in perfect amity, removed very soon the last vestige of hostility to specialism. These men and a few others who were then devoting their time to special work in Philadelphia formed but a "corporal's guard," and were maintaining themselves in an uncongenial, not to say a hostile, environment.

The classes graduating in the University of Pennsylvania in 1870 received no instruction about the eye other than the inimitable lectures on its anatomy given annually by the renowned Joseph Leidy, and an occasional opportunity to witness the couching of a cataract by the professor of surgery, or to see examples of such inflammatory affections as applied for treatment at the semi-weekly clinics. During my own medical course at the University I did not hear the slightest mention made of the errors of refraction. There had been a large eye clinic at the now famous "Wills Eye Hospital" since 1836, but its daily service had been conducted for the most part by general physicians and surgeons who treated inflammations of the eye and operated on cataracts, sending the successful operations to the optician to select a cataract glass. But for a year or more a change had been creeping in. Dr. Dyer, even then a member of this Society, was doing pioneer work. During my last year in the Medical Department of the University the late Dr. Noyes gave a lantern lecture by invitation, on the diseases of the optic nerve and retina, and Dr. Wm. Thomson, by invitation of the late Dr. William Hunt, spoke to the students, assembled from the various medical schools at the Pennsylvania Hospital surgical clinic, on the refraction errors of the eye. Dr. Geo. C. Harlan, Dr. William Thomson, and Dr. Douglass Hall were on the staff at the Wills Hospital in 1871, and became my first teachers in that institution on diseases of the eye. I asked Dr. Harlan what books I should read. He suggested Soelberg Wells and Donders. I procured a copy of the first from my bookseller but could not secure a copy of Donders' book, but fortunately succeeded in finding one of the new Snydenham translations in the Mercantile Library, where I spent many hours over its pages until, at the time I joined Dr. Norris in his clinic, I could almost recite its coarse print from beginning to finish.

In 1872 there were probably but few more skillful operators than the eminent men composing the staff of the Wills Hospital, but they were standing on the verge of a new era in medicine, the era of specialism.

It is to their credit that they moved forward in the advancing column. Some are gone, but two at least of that staff, Dr. Thomson and Dr. Harlan, are still actively at work, in the front rank of modern ophthalmology, and are as earnestly as ever looking forward and inquiring of the future.

Such was the position of ophthalmology in Philadelphia when Dr. Norris began his work. It seems curious now to look back to the days of '72 and recall the conversations with my new instructor fresh from his European teachers and from the many continental clinics. He spoke frequently of the methods and manner of Donders, whose work I had learned to love and whose genius had fascinated me. We talked of full vs. under corrections in hypermetropia; of atropia, then the only mydriatic at command, for paralyzing the accommodation; was it necessary to employ it or were manifest corrections sufficient? As yet we were without the guiding influence of experience, but as the months and years passed in devotion to the work at the University Hospital Clinic, the habitual use of the mydriatics in the correction of all errors of refraction in asthenopic eyes came to be an established practice, and was systematically taught by Dr. Norris to his University class and became the constant habit, both in the private and public work of his assistants and many of his colleagues in Philadelphia, and in a few years was widely taught through the numerous published papers emanating from that clinic. Dr. Harlan tells me "that in 1870 and 1871 he used atropia for the determination of the total hypermetropia, but by no means constantly, and not at all for refraction purposes in myopia."

While the clinic was still at Ninth and Chestnut streets, it was our daily habit after the work for the day had been completed to walk to the market, then on Fifth Street, above Chestnut, on the site now occupied by the Bourse, for a lunch, which consisted of half a dozen salt oysters on the half shell and a glass of ale. This gave opportunity for many conversations on various topics. On the occasion of one of these saunters down Chestnut street, he said he did not see that there was opportunity for any further

brilliant discoveries in ophthalmology; that the exhaustive work of Helmholtz in physiological optics and the invention of the ophthalmoscope; the classic work of Donders on "The Anomalies of Accommodation and Refraction", and the discoveries of von Graefe in choked disc and iridectomy for glaucoma, the field for any possible brilliant discoveries had been exhausted. Nothing could illustrate better the thoughtfulness of his daily conversation even when off duty than this, and it is interesting to note that the flight of years has served to demonstrate the essential correctness of the view then expressed, since most, if not all, subsequent advances have clustered around the teaching of these masters and have served only to enforce the correctness of their teaching or to develop and enlarge it.

After the removal of the clinic to West Philadelphia the work soon grew to such proportions that more assistance was required, and Dr. Norris appointed, I think in the order named, from time to time in the following years, Dr. Pearsol, now Professor of Anatomy in the University; Dr. Shakespeare, who during his work at the clinic devoted much time to the pathological histology of the eye in Dr. Norris's private laboratory at the hospital, and invented an ingenious ophthalmoscope by means of which not only the static refraction of the eye could be determined with mathematical accuracy, but the size of the blood vessels or any detail of the fundus could be accurately measured and sketched as with the micrometer, and who subsequently was appointed by the government to investigate the origin and nature of cholera. Later Dr. B. A. Randall, now Professor of Otology at the University; Dr. James Wallace; Dr. de Schweinitz, now Professor of Ophthalmology; Dr. G. Oram Ring and Dr. Jno. T. Carpenter, were successively appointed and under the inspiring influence which pervaded the clinic soon placed the eye service at the University Hospital in the front rank of American Ophthalmology and gave to it a world-wide repute by the publications which rapidly succeeded each other from their pens. I cannot forget Dr. Norris's early lectures in the amphitheater at Ninth and Chestnut streets. His extreme diffidence,

not to say embarrassment, in first appearing before the class in those days is still vivid in my memory, but his wise and careful teaching; his earnest search for the truth; his great respect, amounting almost to a feeling of reverence, for his great European teachers, whom he had so recently left, were but the commencement of his own career as a teacher, and fairly foreshadowed the long years of earnest, faithful, and helpful service which he rendered; a great service, not only to the afflicted whom he sought so earnestly to relieve, but to those of us who were privileged to labor with him and to come within the sphere of his stimulating influence and helpful personality. His assistants always entertained for him and his teaching the greatest respect. As an evidence of this it was quite natural to either actually defer to his opinion in any given case of disease, or to mentally refer the matter to his well-known views and practice, under like conditions. To the list of assistants enumerated must be added the names of Dr. Mellor, later appointed Chief of Clinic, and Dr. Charles A. Oliver, and Dr. William Zentmayer, both of whom worked with him at the Wills Eye Hospital, and are now members of its Surgical Staff. All who are familiar with the literature of American Ophthalmology must recall the literary activity of this group of assistants, who began their work at the University Hospital clinic and all of whom look back with gratitude and pride to Dr. Norris as their teacher and friend.

Dr. Norris was not himself a frequent contributor to journalistic literature. He only occasionally would permit the publication of a clinical lecture although often requested to do so, his answer being that there was nothing new in what he had said. His method as a lecturer was not brilliant and did not appeal to the undergraduate in such a manner as to awaken his enthusiasm, but to his assistants and to the numerous post-graduates who came to study ophthalmology at the clinic his lectures were of great interest and value. They were given in well-chosen words and formed an admirable outline of the subject under discussion, not only presenting his own views but the consensus of opinion as set forth in the literature. His thorough familiarity

with the opinions of those who spoke with recognized authority forbade, as it always does, a tendency to dogmatic teaching, which is the secret of the charm exercised by so many teachers. This familiarity with the work, especially of European writers, was obvious in all his contributions to the literature of ophthalmology. An admirable illustration of this is found in his article "Medical Ophthalmology," contributed in 1886, to a system of medicine edited by the late Dr. Wm. Pepper, where, in the brief space of sixty-seven pages, is found the best résumé of all that was known "of the eye symptoms which may be seen in the course of diseases of the general system and in connection with the pathological conditions of the various organs of the body." The introduction to this article is a model of clear, condensed statement, an epitome of all that is to follow, and might well be consulted as an example to be emulated. The same may be said of his portion of the admirable "Text Book of Ophthalmology" published in 1893 under the joint authorship of Dr. Norris and Dr. Oliver, in the brief preface of which he acknowledges his never forgotten "indebtedness to his former teachers, Ferdinand v. Arlt, Edward v. Jaeger, and Ludwig Mauthner, for many of the ideas inculcated in the following pages." Dr. Harlan, in his admirable biography of Dr. Norris presented to the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, to which I am greatly indebted, has pointed out in the following paragraph an important chapter in his life work:

"Perhaps the most important of Dr. Norris's work for advancing the medical interests of Philadelphia was in connection with the University Hospital. He was one of its originators; in fact, the project was launched by the appointment of a committee of the Alumni Society of the Medical Department on a motion made by him. He was a member of the finance committee, of which the indefatigable Pepper was chairman, and subsequently became president of its board of managers. To the last his devotion to its interests and his readiness to work for it never flagged. The last time I saw him, only a few days before his death, he spoke of it with affectionate interest, and expressed the hope that he might soon be well enough to go back to his work there."

The following resolutions passed by his fellow trustees show the estimation in which he was held by them :

“Whereas, The Board of Managers of the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania has been bereft by death of its distinguished president, Dr. William F. Norris ;

“Resolved, That the board has lost a colleague who, as one of the founders of our splendid hospital, gave of his knowledge and experience, time, and private means in the erection of the building, and when the structure was an accomplished fact continued as a member of its Board of Managers, his earnest and unceasing efforts in assuring its equipment, maintenance, extension, and improvement ; that as president of the board for the last nine years, his successful administration, beset with difficulties, has been marked by foresight, patience, and a conscientious attention to duty ; that we mourn a friend who, while he excited our admiration by his wisdom and energy, endeared himself to us by his gentleness and courtesy.”

“In January, 1872, he became a member of the staff of the Wills Eye Hospital, where until within a year of the close of his life he worked with his characteristic care and fidelity, keeping in view the welfare of the patients committed to his care and always careful of the feelings and interests of his colleagues on the staff and maintaining the respect and friendship of both the Board of Management, the Staff of Surgeons, and their many assistants.”
— *Harlan.*

In addition to those already noted, Dr. Norris's principal contributions to the literature of Ophthalmology were an article on “Albuminuric Retinitis” in Dr. Tyson's monograph on Bright's disease ; “Diseases of the Crystalline Lens,” in the well-known “System of Diseases of the Eye by American and Foreign Authors,” collaborated by him and Dr. Oliver ; “Investigations of Double Staining in Microscopical Work,” with Shakespeare ; “A Description of the Anatomy of the Human Retina, with Special Consideration of the Terminal Loops of the Rods and Cones,” with Wallace ; “Foreign Bodies in the Orbit” ; “Brain Tumor with Interesting Eye Symptoms.”

He himself regarded the "System of Diseases of the Eye" as his monumental work. The care with which its large corps of contributors was selected affords a striking illustration of his familiarity with the special work of others and his keen appreciation of what was of lasting value. As a consequence the system is produced by a group of men, selected because of his estimate of the essential value of the work they had done along specific lines of research, and therefore affords the last best presentation of every phase of modern ophthalmology to the date of publication, and must stand as a monument to his sagacity, penetration, and learning.

As a surgeon he must be classed as conservative, rarely if ever stepping aside from the methods of procedure recognized by the best authorities.

As an operator he was careful, cautious, and painstaking, always keeping in mind the welfare of his patient rather than the brilliancy of his procedure or the statistical results of operation. This ever-present regard for the patient modified his attitude frequently towards the work allowed to his assistants and especially to hospital residents usually eager for opportunities to operate. Dr. Norris could not often be induced to risk the hope of a hospital patient, blind with cataract, for instance, by permitting the extraction in the hands of an inexperienced resident physician for the sake of practice, his attitude ever being based upon what he considered his duty to the patient.

Dr. Norris was elected president of this Society in 1884 and presided over its deliberations with dignity and address for five years. He was a member of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia and always took an active interest in its welfare, serving as one of its Board of Censors for ten years. When the forming of sections was decided upon by the College he took an active part in establishing the ophthalmological section, wrote the rules for its government, and was chosen its first chairman. Much of its success was due to his unflagging interest, and the part he took in its scientific work — his presence always being sadly missed when ill health no longer permitted his regular attendance. As the date of the meeting approached he would

frequently inquire of its different members if they had not something of interest to present.

His active life is reflected briefly in the following enumeration of his official positions: Assistant Surgeon in the United States Army, Professor of Ophthalmology in the University of Pennsylvania, Attending Surgeon at Wills Eye Hospital, Chairman of the Section in Ophthalmology and Member of the Board of Censors of the College of Physicians, Vice-President of the Philadelphia Pathological Society, Ophthalmologist to the University Hospital and President of its Board of Trustees, a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences, Companion in the Military Order of the Loyal Legion, member of the American Philosophical Society, and Director of the Mutual Assurance Company.

It is not probable that a life of luxurious ease ever presented itself as a serious temptation to Dr. Norris, if so, the deeper and more abiding charm of a life of devotion to higher ideals and more exalted ambitions claimed his unwavering loyalty — even though the requirement was that of unremitting toil. His life is now a memory, but it must ever remain with us as that of a noble, generous, unselfish presence, that with genial good will and unremitting industry wrought well by our side — a helpful course, and has gone to its reward.

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